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Engendering an Online Community: Supporting Students on the Transition into University Life.

Sam Nolan, Megan Bruce & Steve Leech

Abstract

In this chapter, we explore the issues facing students as they make the transition into Higher Education via a Foundation year. To address some of these issues, we introduce the development of a short pre-arrival course for incoming Foundation students. This course uses live web interactions, together with discussion boards and video interviews with staff and also with former students who have made the transition into university study. Student engagement with the site is evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively through the use of focus groups.

Introduction

The story begins with the need to support our students. Durham University's Foundation Centre allows direct progression to degrees in all departments for students from non-traditional backgrounds. The student cohort is made up of two main groups: mature local students returning to education and younger international students. Students are supported throughout their learning and prepared to begin Level 1 study in all departments of the University. Through detailed focus groups on the student experience, an issue common to both local and international students was identified. Students felt that after accepting an offer from the University, they "want to start straight away" and "have to wait forever" to start learning. They often commented on feeling "ignored" and wondered whether they were "the only one" studying subject X at the Foundation Centre. Added to this, Foundation students have, perhaps, more barriers to overcome on their path to learning than any other student group. The local mature student cohort is highly motivated, yet for many, the transition into University life represents something of a culture shock. A similar shock occurs with younger international students, many of whom are relocating abroad, learning in a second language for the first time, and extending their knowledge. Given the importance of supporting students making the transition into the University, a solution was sought which would engender a sense of community amongst them prior to arriving in Durham. In this chapter we will describe the evolution of this project. First, we look at background studies in the importance of successful student transition. We then move on to a non-exhaustive review of the reasons for pre-arrival intervention and the current provision both within the University and across similar HEIs in the sector, before introducing this project, its outputs, its successes and the direction of future work in this area.

Pre-Arrival: The Critical Phase

For all students the transition into University life is a complex one, as they step away from the known and familiar and enter a new phase of their lives. Keenan (2012), who developed a series of case studies on pre-arrival provision, found that the students' engagement during the pre-arrival stage can be crucial to their subsequent perseverance and success. Moreover, those who fail to engage are more likely to drop-out in their first year. On an emotional level, this step into the unknown can be both exciting and frightening in equal measure. In a series of focus groups which form part of our work, Foundation Students often revealed that, prior to arrival, they thought that they would be "the odd one out", or the only mature/international student, which is rarely the case. In a review of student retention for the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Thomas (2012) found that, a sense of belonging to a university was central to retention and success, and this can be fostered through activities which all students engage with. They identify that student belonging is achieved through:

- Supportive peer relations
- Meaningful interaction between staff and students
- Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners
- An HE experience relevant to students' interests and future goals.

(Thomas, 2012)

The collegiate system and academic departments at Durham University have a successful track record in supporting students when they start their degree study, but, as noted, and with particular reference to Foundation students, pre-arrival support is a key area that can be overlooked. However, as Yorke and Thomas (2003) note, the way a university introduces students from lower socio-economic groups to university life is crucial in enhancing retention and fostering engagement.

Due to the nature of the Foundation Centre cohort, the majority of our students have particular concerns about starting a degree course at a UK HEI. Those who are mature learners may have had a negative experience of education previously which led them to drop out of study, while those who are international are often concerned about the linguistic or cultural aspects of the experience. Lumsden et al. (2010) point out that a mismatch between previous educational experience and the differing demands of university expectations is often at the heart of why students tend to be unsuccessful in transitioning to university life. They cite examples such as poor IT skills, lack of analytical reading skills, lack of research skills, and focus on structured learning to pass exams to explain students' lack of success. In addition, research shows that the majority of students who drop out of university do so in the first year. Most of these students cite 'lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required' (Wingate, 2007: p. 392, in Lumsden et al., 2010). In contrast, students who are most likely to succeed are ones who are embedded from both an academic and social aspect (Lumsden et al., 2010, Wingate, 2007, Crabtree et al., 2007, Reason et al.,

2006, Mayhew et al., 2010).

Our pre-arrival site addresses both of these issues: it has a strong focus on skills required for HE in general as well as in specific terms; and it fosters crucial social relationships to allow students to feel connected with one another. Many of our mature students tend not to live in college, so can find it difficult to make friends and connect with other students. Engaging online in discussion fora allows them to build relationships before arriving and makes them feel part of the community before the course begins.

Bain describes university as 'one continuous classroom without walls', and pre-arrival engagement underpins this shift in outlook (Bain, 2012). He argues that every conversation that students have, all the interactions with peers and staff and everything they read contributes to their learning and thinking skills. Facilitating these kind of interactions with other students and staff for an additional period before the start of the course helps students to make that adjustment earlier than previously possible in their learning journey. In this way, students are able to maximize learning opportunities from the very first day of the face-to-face delivery of the degree programme.

Lumsden et al (2010) argue that for students entering higher education through the non-traditional agenda to be successful there needs to be a shift in understanding of transition. They suggest that resources need to focus on the transition process in the expectation that both learning and retention will be better.

Given the solid background of research others have undertaken in this area, we did a quick review of the work done by other Higher Education Institutions (HEI) before developing our own, bespoke solution.

Sector Review

Almost every HEI provider has tackled this problem. In a series of case studies from various HEIs, Kennan (2012) describes different approaches with different outcomes (condensed in Table 8.1).

University	Aim of Intervention		Mechanism of Intervention
University of Sussex	Direct	Online	Online Registration and Enrolment Web Portal
Bournemouth University	Provide contextualized pre-learning activities in a phased manner.	VLE Based	Site (<i>SteppingStones2HE</i>)
University of Bradford	Engender sense of community	amongst	Social Media

	incoming students
Kingston University	Provide concise targeted Online pre-arrival portal information and aid in retention

Table 8.1: Summarised from (Keenan, 2012) on the aim and mechanism of online pre-arrival support at several UK HEIs.

In addition, work at the University of York (Davis, 2010) for example, has shown that such approaches can significantly enhance the student's perception of belonging to an academic community - even before they arrive at university. This reduces the attrition rate of students who accept an offer but ultimately fail to complete enrolment, research evidences this is a particular issue for first-generation students (Jaschik, 2014). The need for pre-arrival courses has also been noted by both MOOC and commercial course providers. For example, the UK MOOC provider FutureLearn (2014), ran a course, *Preparing for Uni* (developed and branded for UEA but open to all) which supports students in their transition into HE. Additionally, Palgrave Macmillan - the leading publisher of study skills resources - provides a *Getting ready for academic study* module as part of their *skills4studycampus* pack (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Our primary aim in developing a pre-arrival portal for Foundation students at Durham was to create a resource tailored to the needs of Foundation students which would ease their progress into university life using introductory academic materials. To enhance a feeling of belonging, we also wanted to offer students the opportunity to create an online community through the use of webchats and discussion boards. As has been well documented, students often use social media to communicate pre-arrival (DeAndrea, 2012). Our discussion boards were a potentially useful mechanism for allowing students to meet their new classmates.

As has been identified by several authors both mature students and international students often feel isolated when making the transition into university study. As has been identified by Waller (2006) grouping students as "mature", or "non-traditional" often disguises a vastly diverse set of individuals, each with their own personal set of issues. Waller adds, however, that many mature students feel a sense of social isolation whilst at university. They often have their own social networks away from their studies and feel isolated from the rest of the student body due to their age. Many studies of international students have discussed several potential barriers they may have to overcome while making the transition into successful study in Higher Education. Andrade (2006) and Mori (2000), for example both identify language and communication issues and cultural differences as possible barriers. Feelings of isolation and difference affect both mature and international students. Clearly, anything which can alleviate such feelings may ease the progress of students.

Developing a Pre-Arrival Platform

To allow use outside the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), we decided

to use our own platform to host the pre-arrival portal, this being based on the open source, Drupal CMS. Each student was given a unique username which allowed access to a suite of tailored activities, some specific to their discipline route and some more generic. In addition to allowing us to have control over the look and feel of the site, it allowed for the use of cookies to monitor student use of the various activities. These activities included:

1. Introductory Academic Materials

For each first term module, we produced a short (5 minute) introductory video with the module leader discussing the content, its assessments, and the discipline in general. In some cases, tutors went further and produced additional mini audio and video lectures which introduced key course concepts, previously identified by earlier students as interesting or exciting. In science subjects, students were able to access some of the Interactive Screen Experiments discussed in Chapter 4. As all of our students are entering HE for the first time, the ability to identify with their teachers and become familiar with their teaching style was intended to help to overcome student anxiety.

2. Interviews with Former Students

A series of video interviews with former Foundation students were presented, some having just completed the Foundation Year and others from later in the degree program. We asked them a series of questions, including:

- *Why did you choose to study at Durham University?*

From the students' perspective, this question allowed us to understand what they view as unique, attractive features of the University and its Foundation Centre. A subset of mature students, for instance, felt that the Foundation Centre's position as one of the few direct entry mechanisms to higher education at a Russell Group University was an important factor for them. Others, many whose homes were relatively close, were impressed the range of facilities facilities for mature students.

- *Why did you return to education?*

Here we try to ascertain the motivation of the students, their views on the value of learning, and their conceptions about the nature of learning. Many mature students mentioned that recently becoming a parent was a motivating factor, and they suggested that this came from wanting to improve their own situation, but also it would signal the importance of education to their children. Others often discussed dissatisfaction in their current employment and wanting to have a second chance at education.

- *Were you made to feel welcome as a mature/international student?*

This question allowed students to explore issues of isolation, and the many different support structures that the Centre, the colleges and the University

provide. Both agreed that they were made to feel genuinely welcome and had made fast friends amongst fellow students and staff.

- *What is the teaching like?*

Here we got students to explore their perceptions of University classroom learning and the realities of being a member of the Centre. Students often talked about the open nature of the classrooms, where questioning is actively encouraged, and that although many classes were 3 hours long, a variety of teaching occurred to make the sessions feel enjoyable.

- *How many hours of study are there? How were you able to balance family life and full-time study?*

Given the external demands on many of our mature students, due to family responsibilities, questions on the logistics of daily student learning are important. The approachability of staff was mentioned by one mature student with young children; she found that support and flexibility was important in encouraging her to continue her studies.

- *Did you feel well supported at the Foundation Centre?*

Given the significant transitions all our students are undertaking, a supportive environment is crucial. Seeing current students reflect on this is also particularly important. Again, students described the approachability of staff as well as how a community of students, through self-help groups, could provide a lot of additional study group support.

- *Did you enjoy your time at the Foundation Centre? Would you recommend the Foundation Centre to a friend?*

These questions pull apart both student enjoyment and their impression that their year of study was worthwhile. All the student volunteers were extremely conscientious and discussed at length their perceptions of the strengths the centre has. Multiple students the close knit community of the centre, and how they had utilized the support of fellow students and staff to develop successful learning practices.

- *Did you feel well prepared for Undergraduate study?*

Here a former, mature international student (at the time in the second year of a physical sciences degree) discussed how study at the centre was allowing him to thrive in the later years of his degree.

3. *Student Discussion Forum*

A discussion board was set up for students to interact with each other. We provided a general discussion space, as well as boards for different clusters of routes (e.g.

Science, Social Science, Business, Arts and Humanities). This was a particularly popular element of the site, with over 200 posts in the first year.

Live Webchats

Through the month of September (up until the week before students arrive) we ran advertised, scheduled, half-hour webchats using the Elluminate platform. These webchats were focussed on the following area:

- Introduction to the University;
- Introducing the College System;
- Introducing the Foundation Centre;
- Introducing Induction.

The webchats were recorded so that they could be viewed asynchronously. It was noted that around 75% of our new students viewed either the live session or the recording within 48 hours of transmission.

Results

1. Student Engagement: Quantitative Measures

In the first year, all elements of the site were available to physical science students, with everything but the introductory academic materials (which were science based) being open to the rest of the student body. In later years, further introductory academic material videos were prepared and all the activities became available to all students. Through tracking web use data, it is clear that student engagement with the site is extremely high, as shown in Figures 8.1 and 8.2 below:

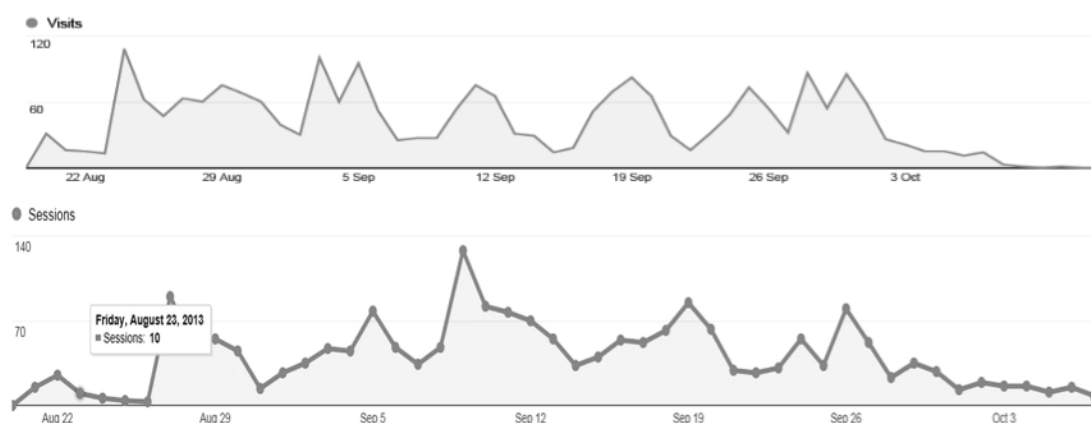


Figure 8.1: Visits by registered users of the site during summer 2012 (top) and 2013 (bottom). Weekly peaks can be seen during September as students either watch live or engage with the transmission of each weekly webchat.

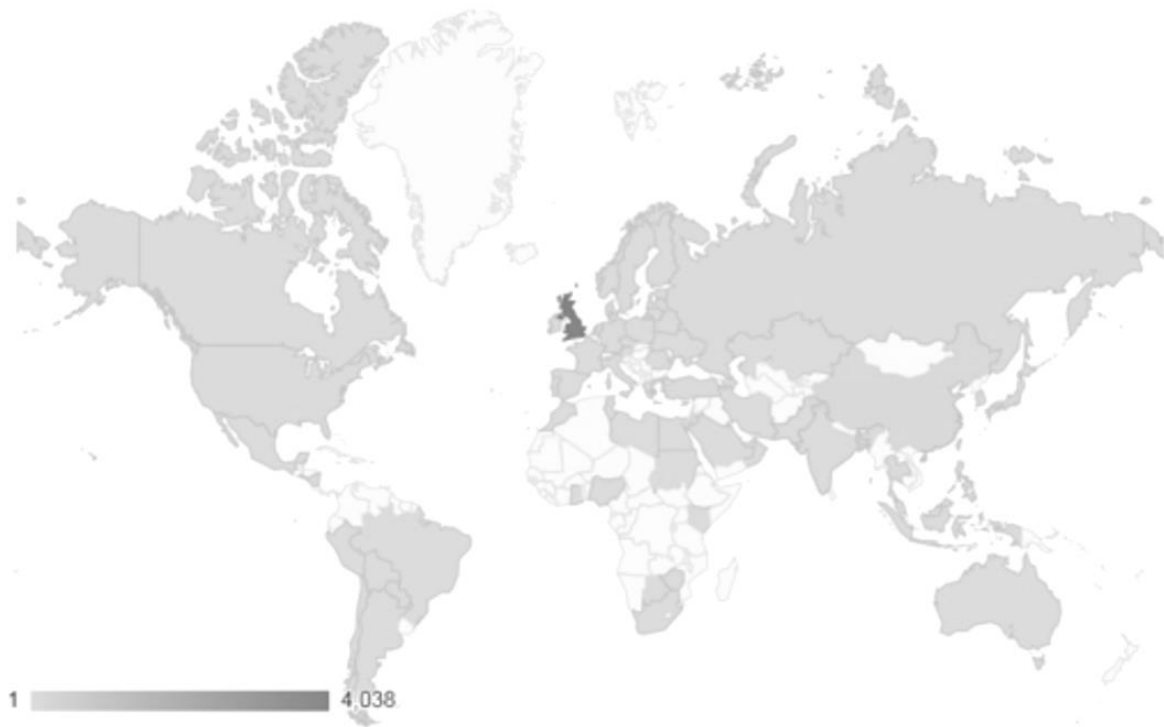


Figure 8.2: Integrated visits of registered users to the website during the Summers of 2012-2014 by country of users. This indicates significant use by both home mature students and younger international students.

This evidence and the data from which it is derived indicate that in any given year an average student engages with the site 4-5 times, and typically spends around 10 hours on the site pre-arrival. Only around 10% of our students fail to engage with the site at all.

2. *Student Engagement: Qualitative Measures*

Online feedback was taken from students via the discussion boards, with many elements being positive. For example, 'Can't wait to get started - but a bit nervous. I'm also a mature student (30 next year). I have three young children. The website is great too. I've been having a look at the activities and mini lectures - very helpful'.

In depth focus groups revealed the students often felt isolated over the summer prior to starting with us. As one put it:

'You've accepted an offer, but then it all goes quiet. You just want to get started, but you hear nothing and all the time you're worried about whether you've made the right choice. This website was a godsend, it let you see your tutors, let you talk to your fellow students and with the weekly webchats, made you feel part of something.'

Increased student confidence was also evident during the induction week, with students generally aware of where they needed to be, and more engaged with the activities that were taking place. As a staff member put it:

‘They often come bounding over and say, I know you’ll be teaching me, as I’ve seen you on the online videos. That initial confidence has really increased, and it allows us to start an effective dialogue around learning earlier.’

Discussion

The item with which students engaged with most over the first two years of the project, was the student discussion board. The exchanges were loosely monitored by staff and their effect is captured by one exchange:

‘I’m a little nervous, because I couldn’t afford visiting the UK for open campuses, thus I don’t know what Durham Uni’s atmosphere is like, but I got the feeling that this was one of my biggest and hopefully right decisions to choose this university. Has anyone of you visited Durham Uni? How was it like?’

Before staff could reply to reassure the student, one of the prospective, local, mature students responded:

‘Hi and welcome. Whereabouts in the world are you traveling from? I don’t know what Durham Uni itself is like but I was born and raised in Durham so I can assure you, we are a very friendly bunch :-)’ (*sic*)

A friendly dialogue began between the two students. This highlights a key feature of the pre-entry materials: students were encouraged to work together to support each other. This discussion board offers a mechanism for addressing a key issue in successful transition, a sense of belonging, which can also reduce drop-out (Read et al., 2003). This problem can be exacerbated when issues of social and cultural capital can prevent students from feeling a part of the community of the institution. By simply allowing students a mechanism for pre-arrival communication, we help in overcoming feelings of isolation.

Conclusion

The transition into higher education is a difficult time for many incoming freshers and can be even harder for international and mature students, as they enter a new environment, often with a different language and practices to deal with. We were able to develop a successful, pre-arrival online system that built upon examples of good practice, and is being actively used by over 90% of the students.

Following the success of this project, one of the authors (SN) has developed a larger project (Transitions into HE) which was recently funded by the University. Working in partnership with the Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre at the University this project will deliver a four-week, online course to all first year Durham undergraduates in the September prior to their arrival at Durham. The four weeks of the course each address a different issue, namely:

- Preparing for Academic Study

Here, video interviews with current students and staff will show the students' and the tutors' perceptions of the transition into university life.

- Independent Learning

The focus of this unit will be on differences between study at school and at university, with a particular emphasis on the increase in the expected amount of self-directed, independent learning. Activities are being designed which include developing or enhancing time management skills, and on how current students cope with their academic workload, and on developing a work-life balance.

- Digital Literacy and Digital Footprints

This unit will focus on developing skills in using the internet for academic purposes as well as working in and with library resources to access academic information. A secondary focus will be the use of social media by employers to research prospective job applicants, and on how individual students can manage their own online presence to enhance employability.

- Preparing for Arrival

Finally, this unit, which will be delivered the week prior to arrival, will provide students with both a chance to reflect on the materials covered in the previous units, and a look at the significant skill development courses available. In addition there will be an opportunity for students to ask questions.

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